Rationalist-Explanation...
PDF

you are an excellent political scientist in bargaining model. read this article, summarize it in very detail.

Thought for 10s >

Below is a **very detailed, section-by-section** summary of James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War" (IO 1995). Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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Core puzzle and purpose

- **Central puzzle:** War is **ex post inefficient**—it destroys resources—so if leaders are rational and unitary, they should prefer a negotiated settlement that avoids those costs.
- Fearon's target is **"rationalist" (unitary-actor) explanations**: war can happen even when leaders weigh costs and risks.
- Main objective: **clarify what counts as a coherent rationalist explanation** and **prune** common claims that don't actually resolve the puzzle.

Fearon's organizing claim

A coherent rationalist explanation must answer:

- **Why do states fail to reach an ex ante bargain** that both prefer to the lottery of war (given war's costs and risks)?

Fearon argues:

- Many standard "rationalist" stories **don't address bargaining failure** (they explain why war might look attractive, not why a mutually preferable bargain can't be found).

- When you take bargaining seriously, most "rationalist" explanations collapse into (at most) **two major mechanisms**, plus a weaker third candidate:
  1. **Private information + incentives to misrepresent**
  2. **Commitment problems** (inability to credibly commit under anarchy)
  3. **Issue indivisibility** (logically possible, empirically less compelling)

What Fearon thinks fails: five common rationalist arguments

Fearon reviews five "tenable in the literature" rationalist arguments and rejects the first three as not actually solving the puzzle, while showing the latter two are incomplete unless rebuilt into mechanism (1).

(1) "Anarchy causes war"

- Standard Waltz-style claim: no higher authority → force is always possible.
- Fearon's critique:
  - "Nothing prevents war" ≠ "war occurs."
  - If war is costly, **why not bargain**?
  - Anarchy matters **only via specific mechanisms** (mainly commitment problems), not as a standalone explanation.

(2) "Expected benefits exceed expected costs"

- Popular expected-utility intuition: if both think fighting pays, war happens.
- Fearon's critique:
  - With divisible issues and positive costs, there is usually a **bargaining range** both prefer to war.
  - So "positive expected utility" by itself doesn't explain why bargaining fails.

(3) "Rational preventive war"

- Usual story: declining state attacks now to avoid being weaker later.
- Fearon's critique:
  - This is incomplete unless you show **why a deal across time can't be struck**.
  - Once fully specified, preventive war is really a **commitment problem** (mechanism 2), not "power shifts" alone.

(4) "Miscalculation due to lack of information"

- States fight because they misjudge capabilities or resolve.
- Fearon: this points the right direction, but:
  - If the problem is just lack of info, why not **communicate**?
  - A rationalist story must explain **why information can't be credibly shared**.

(5) "Miscalculation/disagreement about relative power"

- Blainey: wars begin when states disagree about relative strength.
- Fearon: disagreement can matter, but:
  - If leaders are fully rational, persistent disagreement requires **private information** (not "complexity" as a handwave).
  - And again: why can't diplomacy reveal the truth? Answer: **strategic incentives to misrepresent**.

The bargaining baseline: why bargains should exist

Fearon formalizes the dispute as bargaining over a continuous issue space $x \in [0, 1]$ (think: fraction of contested territory controlled by A).

War as a costly lottery

- Let A win with probability p.
- Let costs be $C_A > 0, C_B > 0$.
- If winner gets its ideal outcome, expected utilities:
  - A's value of war: $p - C_A$
  - B's value of war: $(1 - p) - C_B$

Key result: a bargaining range always exists (under broad conditions)

- If utilities are continuous and (weakly) concave (risk-neutral/averse), there exists a set of peaceful settlements both prefer to war.
- In the **risk-neutral linear case**, both prefer any settlement in:
  - $(p - C_A,\ p + C_B)$
- Intuition:
  - War's costs create a "wedge" that opens space for mutually better deals.

Implications

- The common idea of "deadlock" (no mutually preferred bargain) is usually wrong **unless**:
  - Issues are effectively indivisible, or
  - bargaining fails due to information/commitment problems.

Mechanism 3 (weaker): Issue indivisibility

Fearon concedes indivisibility is logically coherent:

- If issues cannot be split, and no feasible settlement lies within the bargaining range, war can occur.

But he argues it is often **empirically unconvincing** because:

- Most international issues are **multi-dimensional**, allowing compromise.
- **Side payments** and **issue linkage** often make problems divisible in principle.
- Even discrete issues can sometimes be handled with **randomization/rotation**—yet they usually aren't, because of **domestic constraints, norms, or politics**.

Bottom line:

- "Indivisibility" is often **endogenous** to other mechanisms (especially domestic politics), rather than a natural property of the issue.

Mechanism 1: Private information + incentives to misrepresent

This is Fearon's first "foundational" mechanism.

Step 1: Why disagreement requires private information (under strict rationality)

- Fearon invokes a Harsanyi-style logic: if actors share the same information and are fully rational, they should converge on the same beliefs.
- Therefore, rationalist disagreement about:
  - relative power, or
  - willingness to fight (resolve)
    must come from **private information**.

Step 2: Why "just communicate" doesn't solve it

- States have incentives to **bluff, conceal, or exaggerate**:

    - exaggerate resolve/capability to extract concessions
    - conceal plans/capabilities to preserve first-strike advantage
    - avoid appearing as aggressor (audience and coalition politics)
- Therefore:
    - **cheap talk** (costless statements) is not credible
    - **costly signaling** may be required, but costly signals often **raise the real risk of war**

A simple crisis-bargaining model (take-it-or-leave-it)

- A makes a demand; B either accepts or fights.
- If B has **private information** about its cost of war or capability, A chooses a demand trading off:
    - a better deal if accepted
    - higher probability of war if rejected
- Result: for a broad set of conditions, equilibrium includes a **positive ex ante probability of war**, even though peaceful bargains exist.

Why Blainey is incomplete

- War doesn't require disagreement about relative power specifically.
- Uncertainty about **costs/resolution/values** can generate war even if power is agreed upon.

Historical illustrations Fearon uses

1) July Crisis 1914 (resolve signaling and misrepresentation)

- Germans received signals Russia might fight, but discounted them as "bluster" because Russia had incentives to bluff.
- Germany also had incentives to conceal how strongly it backed Austria (to avoid looking like aggressor and to preserve domestic/foreign political support).
- The broader point: incentives to misrepresent make credible clarification of resolve hard, pushing states toward actions that raise the risk of war.

2) Russo-Japanese War 1904 (capabilities, secrecy, and unverifiable private info)

- Russia widely believed it would defeat Japan; Japan's internal assessments were far less confident, and its leaders possessed **better intelligence** about local balances and strategy.

- Japan could not credibly reveal its true capabilities/strategy without undermining them; Russia had no reason to believe verbal claims anyway.
- Private information + secrecy → persistent misestimation → bargaining failure → war.

Two additional pathways under this mechanism

- **Reputation building:** states may fight (even losing wars) to signal toughness or low costs (so others don't exploit them later).
- **War as information revelation:** states may seek conflict to demonstrate capability changes (rising or "not-so-declining" powers proving strength).

Mechanism 2: Commitment problems (anarchy with bite)

Fearon's second foundational mechanism: war occurs because even when states know the bargaining range, they may be unable to commit to uphold a deal.

Key idea:

- War can happen not because bargains don't exist, but because **they aren't enforceable**.

Fearon emphasizes this differs from classic security dilemma accounts:

- In his commitment-problem logic, motivations may be **fully known and stable**; the issue is **strategic incentives to renege**, not uncertainty about intentions.

He highlights **three specific commitment-problem contexts**.

(2a) Preemptive war and first-strike advantages

Analogy: two "gunslingers"

- both prefer peace to mutual gunfight,
- but each most prefers killing the other by surprise,
- and cannot credibly commit not to strike first.

Mapping to IR:

- If attacking first yields a large advantage, peace may be **non-self-enforcing**.

Formal intuition:

- Let A's chance of winning be higher if it attacks first than if it defends.
- A peaceful settlement must give each side enough that neither wants to defect by first strike.
- Large first-strike advantage can shrink the set of self-enforcing bargains and, in extreme cases, eliminate them.

Fearon's empirical stance:

- Pure "dominant-strategy preemption" is probably rare.
- More plausibly, first-strike advantages **narrow the bargaining range**, making other problems (info, indivisibility) more likely to tip into war.

(2b) Preventive war as a commitment problem (not just power shifts)

Fearon reframes preventive war:

- Declining power attacks **not because it expects to be attacked later**, but because it expects to face **worse bargaining terms later** when the other is stronger.
- The rising state cannot credibly commit today not to exploit tomorrow's greater leverage.

Dynamic model sketch:

- bargaining repeats over time,
- probability of A winning a future war rises,
- in equilibrium, A demands more in future periods,
- B may rationally prefer war now if future concessions implied by the commitment problem are too costly.

Implications:

- Preventive war can occur even with complete agreement about power trajectories.
- "Power shift" is not sufficient; **non-commitment** is the key.
- "Compensation" in classical balance-of-power politics can be interpreted as attempts to manage commitment problems by limiting or offsetting power gains.

Illustration: WWI preventive logic

- German elites feared Russia's growth would translate into future leverage in Balkans/Near East.

- Hard to commit to future restraint; even if Russia *wanted* restraint today, once strong it would have incentives to press.

(2c) Strategic territory and the appeasement problem

Territory is special because it can itself change future power.

- Even if both sides would prefer limited concessions to war,
- concessions might give the recipient **disproportionate future bargaining leverage**,
- and the recipient can't credibly commit not to exploit that leverage later.

So:

- the other side may rationally reject "appeasement," making the issue look indivisible.
- but the real driver is **commitment failure**, not intrinsic indivisibility.

Illustrative case: Finland–Soviet Winter War

- Finns feared that conceding strategically relevant positions would enable greater Soviet coercion later.
- Even if Stalin preferred limited aims initially, credible commitment not to demand more was weak.

Conclusion: what Fearon claims we should take away

Claim 1 (baseline)

- Under broad conditions, **mutually preferable bargains exist** because war is costly and risky.

Claim 2 (foundations)

- Rationalist/neorealist explanations reduce mainly to:
  1. **Private information + incentives to misrepresent** (bargaining failure despite possible deals)
  2. **Commitment problems** (bargains exist but aren't enforceable)

Meta-implications for research

- Many favorite “causes of war” in IR (offense-defense balance, polarity, power shifts, etc.) must be shown to work by:
  - generating an **information problem** or a **commitment problem**
  - in specific settings, rather than as vague systemic claims.

Appendix: what the formal proofs are doing (in plain terms)

- **Claim 1 proof:** shows that with risk-neutral/averse preferences and positive war costs, there is always some interval of settlements both sides prefer to war.
- **Claim 2 (take-it-or-leave-it with private info):** shows equilibrium where A makes an optimal demand and B fights if its private cost is low; importantly, **war occurs with positive probability** when A’s war costs are small enough.
- **Cheap talk extension:** adding costless diplomatic statements does not generally change A’s behavior or the ex ante war risk, because B wants to claim “high resolve” regardless of type; therefore, talk doesn’t separate types.

If you want, I can also extract the paper’s logic into a compact **bargaining-model “template”** (players, info structure, commitment vs. info failures, and what observable implications each mechanism generates for empirical testing).

Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

Sources

↳ Fearon’s critique

explain fearon's critique on this mechanism in more detail

Thought for 23s >

Fearon’s “critique” is basically the same move over and over: **if war is costly, there should usually be some deal both sides prefer to fighting**—so any proposed

"mechanism" has to explain **why they can't get to that deal**. If it only explains why war *might look appealing*, it's not yet a bargaining-failure explanation.

Below I unpack his critique of each of the standard mechanisms/arguments he reviews, with the extra "bargaining logic" filled in.

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1) "Anarchy causes war" — why Fearon says this isn't an explanation (yet)

What the argument says: No world government → force is always possible → war happens.

Fearon's critique:

- "War is possible" doesn't answer "why war occurs" when both sides **know** war is costly.
- Under anarchy, yes, there's no enforcer—but **why can't they still negotiate** a settlement both prefer to paying war costs?
- Same issue for security dilemma/spiral stories if they don't model bargaining: either
  - leaders *anticipate* the spiral → then ask why they can't bargain out of it, or
  - leaders *don't anticipate* it → then it's an **information/miscalculation** story, and you still have to explain why diplomacy can't fix it.

What would make "anarchy" work for Fearon: it must be translated into a **specific bargaining failure**, especially a **commitment problem** (states can't credibly commit not to exploit future advantages, etc.). Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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2) "Positive expected utility" — why "both think war is worth it" doesn't work

What the argument says: If each side's expected benefits exceed expected costs, war is rational.

Fearon's critique (the bargaining range):

- Even if war's expected payoff is positive for both, as long as **war is costly**, there is typically an **ex ante bargaining range** of settlements that *both* prefer to the risky,

costly lottery of war.

- So "they prefer war" isn't enough; you must explain **why no negotiated outcome in that range is reached**.
- Fearon's punchline: you don't explain war by showing war can be "rational"; you explain war by showing why states **can't locate or agree on a deal** that avoids costs they both want to avoid.

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3) "Rational preventive war" — why "power shifts" is not the mechanism

What the argument says (standard version): A declining state attacks now because the other will be stronger later.

Fearon's critique:

- A looming power shift, by itself, still leaves open a bargaining solution: why not strike a **deal across time** (today's concessions for tomorrow's restraint)?
- The real rationalist logic, he argues, is **commitment failure**: the rising state cannot credibly commit **not** to use its future leverage to demand more (and the declining state cannot credibly commit to tolerate worse terms later).
- He's explicit that preventive war can happen **even when both sides agree about relative power**—so it's not "misperceiving the balance," it's "can't enforce the future bargain." Rationalist-Explanations-for-War
- Also important: the declining state attacks not mainly because it expects to be attacked later, but because it fears "the peace it will have to accept" once the other is stronger. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

So: **preventive war = dynamic commitment problem under anarchy**, not just "anticipated shift in power."

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4) "War from lack of information (miscalculation)" — why "uncertainty" isn't enough

What the argument says: Leaders miscalculate (capabilities or resolve), stumble into war.

Fearon's critique:

- If the only issue were ignorance, why not **ask** and clarify? Why can't states communicate and avoid an inefficient mistake?
- In a rationalist frame, leaders should have incentives to **share information** that would reveal a mutually preferred deal in the bargaining range.
- Therefore, "lack of information" can't be the cause by itself; the real cause must be **what prevents disclosure**.

Fearon's fix: private information matters only when paired with **incentives to misrepresent** (bluffing, concealment, strategic lying), which makes diplomacy/cheap talk non-credible.

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5) "Disagreement about relative power (Blainey)" — where Fearon thinks it stops short

What the argument says: Wars begin when states disagree about who would win.

Fearon's critique has two layers:

1. **Logical layer:** Disagreement could indeed shrink/eliminate the bargaining range if each side believes it will win. But then you must explain: **how can rational actors hold conflicting expectations**?
2. **Bargaining layer:** Even if they disagree, why can't communication resolve it? Again, because actors have incentives to misrepresent.

He also adds a correction: war doesn't require disagreement about power specifically—uncertainty about **values/costs/resolve** can generate war too.

The common "Fearon critique" in one sentence

A lot of IR "mechanisms" explain **why war might be chosen**, but Fearon insists a real rationalist explanation must show **why bargaining fails despite a mutually preferable set of deals**—and most stories only work once you rebuild them as either:

- **private information + incentives to misrepresent**, or
- **commitment problems**.

If you tell me which *one* you mean by "this mechanism" (anarchy? positive expected utility? preventive war? miscalculation? Blainey?), I can zoom in and walk through Fearon's specific logic step-by-step with the exact model intuition he's using.

Sources

↳ A simple crisis-bargaining model (take-it-or-leave-it)

explain it in more detail

Thought for 26s

Sure — here's the **take-it-or-leave-it crisis bargaining model** and Fearon's **critique / point** in much more detail, step by step.

1) What the model is trying to show

Fearon wants to show a very specific thing:

- **Even if both sides agree on relative power** (same p), war can still happen.
- The reason is not "war is rational" in some vague sense, but a precise bargaining failure: **A can't condition its offer on B's privately known willingness to fight**, so A optimally "pushes" and sometimes triggers war. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

This is his response to the idea that wars mainly come from disagreement about relative power (Blainey). Fearon's move is: "No — uncertainty about *costs/resolve* alone can generate war." Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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2) The game (structure)

Think of a crisis where one side can make a demand and the other side can accept or fight.

- There's a status quo q.
- **State A** moves first and chooses a demand/outcome x (a "grab").

- **State B** observes x and chooses:
  - **Acquiesce** (accept): payoffs $(x,\ 1-x)$
  - **Fight**: payoffs $(p-C_A,\ 1-p-C_B)$

Key information assumption:

- p is common knowledge (they agree on relative power).
- **B privately observes its cost of fighting** C_B; A only knows a distribution over it.

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3) Complete information benchmark: why war disappears

If **no private information** exists, A can tailor the demand exactly:

- B is indifferent between accepting and fighting when:

$$1-x = 1-p-C_B \quad \Rightarrow \quad x = p + C_B$$

- So A demands **just up to B's reservation level** $p + C_B$, B accepts, no war.

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That's Fearon's baseline: with complete info, bargaining finds a deal and avoids inefficient war.

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4) With private information: B's acceptance rule is simple

Given any demand x, B compares:

- Accept: $1-x$
- Fight: $1-p-C_B$

So B fights iff:

$$1-p-C_B > 1-x \quad \Leftrightarrow \quad C_B < x-p$$

Meaning:

- "Low-cost / high-resolve" types (small C_B) fight.
- "High-cost" types accept.

Fearon states this threshold form directly in the appendix: in equilibrium, **B fights iff** $c_B < x-p$. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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5) Why A *chooses* a demand that risks war

Since A doesn't know C_B, it can't pick "the" perfect $x = p + C_B$. Instead A faces a tradeoff:

- Higher x = **better if accepted**
- Higher x = **more likely to be rejected → war**

Formally, if B's costs are distributed $H(\cdot)$, then:

- Probability of war given demand x is:

$$\Pr(\text{war}|x) = H(x - p)$$

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- A's expected payoff from demanding x is:

$$U_A(x) = (1 - H(x - p)) \cdot x \ + \ H(x - p) \cdot (p - C_A)$$

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So A is doing a very intuitive thing:

- "If I demand more, lots of types will still cave… but the toughest types will fight."

And here's the key: **for a wide set of conditions, the optimal x^* makes $H(x^* - p) > 0$**, i.e., a **positive probability of war**. Fearon explicitly notes: if A's own war cost isn't too large, A's optimal grab yields a positive chance of war. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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6) The "Fearon critique" embedded in this: miscalculation isn't the primitive

A lot of the literature basically says: "wars happen because leaders miscalculate."

Fearon's critique is: **okay, but why doesn't diplomacy fix that?** If war is inefficient, rational leaders have incentives to reveal enough information to locate a deal in the bargaining range. So the *real* causal story must explain **why information isn't credibly shared**. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

This take-it-or-leave-it model gives you the first half (private info → risk of war), but Fearon immediately says: that still isn't enough unless you also explain why the private info can't be communicated credibly. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

7) Add cheap talk: why “just ask them” still doesn’t work

Fearon then adds a stage where B can make **any announcement** about its interests/resolve before A chooses x. But the announcement is **cheap talk** (no payoff consequences). Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

His result is sharp:

- In equilibria where A uses a pure strategy, **A demands the same x^* regardless of what B says**, and
- the **ex ante risk of war is unchanged** from the game without talk.

Intuition (the “pooling” logic)

Suppose A *did* react to messages, e.g.:

- if B says “I’m highly resolved,” A demands less;
- if B says “I’m not resolved,” A demands more.

Then **every type of B**—even the low-resolve ones—would prefer to claim “high resolve” to induce the smaller demand.

So:

- B has an incentive to **misrepresent** its type (always pick the message that makes A “grab less”).
- A anticipates this and learns nothing from words alone.

This is exactly Fearon’s critique of “war from lack of information” as a standalone explanation: **it’s not that states can’t talk; it’s that they can’t credibly talk** when they have incentives to bluff.

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8) So what *would* change the outcome? Costly signals (and why that’s dangerous)

Fearon says the conclusion changes “slightly” if B can make statements **costly**—mobilization, arms buildup, alliances, etc.

But he adds a darker implication:

- To be informative, a signal must be **harder for low-resolve types to send**.
- Often the signals that separate types are exactly the ones that **create a real risk of war** (mobilization, forward deployment, etc.).
- So signaling can reduce misperception, but it can also **increase** the probability of war because it involves actions that bring states closer to the brink.

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9) What the mechanism really is (in Fearon's terms)

This model is not "war happens because people miscalculate."

It's:

1. There is **private information** about resolve/costs (C_B).
2. There are **incentives to misrepresent**, so cheap talk doesn't reveal it.
3. A makes the best "grab" it can under uncertainty.
4. Some B types reject and war occurs — **even though a bargain existed ex ante**.

If you want, I can also walk through the **comparative statics** Fearon highlights in the appendix (how C_A, the distribution of C_B, and the hazard rate shape x^* and the war probability $H(x^* - p)$).

Sources

↳ **for a wide set of conditions, the optimal x∗x^*x∗ makes H(x∗−p)\>0H(x^*-p) > 0H(x∗−p)\>0**, i.e., a **positive probability of war**.

explain why

Thought for 19s ›

Because with **private information about B's cost/resolve**, A faces a **profit–risk tradeoff**: by demanding a bit more, A usually gains (because most B-types still cave), and it only *sometimes* "pays" the downside (war). So unless A is very afraid of war (high C_A), A optimally "pushes" hard enough that **some** B-types reject—hence $H(x^* -$

$p) > 0$. Fearon states this directly: “under very broad conditions… if A’s own costs are not too large, then A’s optimal grab produces a positive chance of war.”

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Here’s the logic cleanly.

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1) War happens only for “tough” B-types

In the take-it-or-leave-it game:

- A demands x.
- B fights iff its cost c_B is low enough (high resolve), specifically $c_B < x - p$.

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  So the probability of war given x is:

$$\Pr(\text{war} \mid x) = H(x - p)$$

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2) A’s expected payoff: higher demand = higher prize, higher war risk

Fearon writes A’s expected utility as:

$$u_A(x) = H(x - p)\,(p - C_A) + (1 - H(x - p))\,x$$

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Interpretation:

- With probability $1 - H(x - p)$, B accepts → A gets x.
- With probability $H(x - p)$, B fights → A gets its war value $p - C_A$.

So raising x does two things at once:

1. **If accepted, A gets more**.
2. **More types reject**, so war becomes more likely. Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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3) Why A *still* raises x enough to risk war (when C_A is small)

Imagine starting at a "safe" demand that gets accepted for sure (so war prob $= 0$). If A nudges the demand up slightly:

- **Upside:** all the B-types that still accept now give A a slightly bigger settlement.
- **Downside:** only the newly "pushed over the edge" (the very lowest-cost / most resolved B-types) now fight, and that happens with probability proportional to the density $h(x-p)$.

So A compares:

- a *first-order* gain from extracting a bit more from the many types who accept, vs.
- a *first-order* increase in war probability times the "loss" from war relative to settlement.

Fearon's appendix shows this tradeoff formally via the derivative condition: $u_A(x)$ increases with x when

$$\frac{h(x-p)}{1-H(x-p)} < \frac{1}{x-p+C_A}$$

and the optimum x^* (the interior case) satisfies the equality version.

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Intuition in plain English: if A's war cost C_A is small, then "falling into war" isn't that terrible for A, so A is willing to gamble—push for more and accept some chance that the toughest B-types resist. That's exactly why Fearon concludes: "the ex ante risk of war is always positive for small enough $c_A > 0$." Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

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4) Why "no war" is a special case (requires A to be very war-averse)

Fearon shows the only way to get **zero** war risk is the corner solution $x^* = p$ (then $x^* - p = 0 \Rightarrow H(0) = 0$). That happens only under a restrictive condition (his case (i): $h(0) > 1/C_A$). Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

Then he immediately notes the key punchline:

- "Since the ex ante probability of war is $H(x^* - p)$, only in case (i) can this equal zero, and for small enough C_A case (i) cannot obtain." Rationalist-Explanations-for-War

So unless A's war cost is high enough to make it play very cautiously, the equilibrium demand is above p, implying $x^* - p > 0$, hence $H(x^* - p) > 0$.

One-sentence summary

Incomplete information makes A "screen" B by making a tough demand; when A isn't too scared of war, the extra bargaining gains from pushing outweigh the marginal increase in war risk—so A optimally chooses a demand that some B-types reject, creating a positive probability of war.

Sources

↳ Below is a **very detailed, section-by-section** summary of James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War" (IO 1995).

focusing on the below part, do not contain the part I ask you to explain more, export the version that i can copy into obsidian

markdown

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# Fearon (1995) — *Rationalist Explanations for War* (International Organi

## Big question
- **Puzzle:** War is extremely costly, so **why don't states bargain** to
- **Fearon's move:** Treat war as a bargaining failure problem: if war is

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## What counts as a "rationalist explanation" (Fearon's standard)
A satisfying rationalist explanation must show why states **cannot reach**
- the costs of war,
- risk/uncertainty about outcomes,
- and the fact that negotiated settlements can replicate or improve on exp
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Baseline bargaining logic: why peace should be possible
- Model disputes as bargaining over a divisible issue (e.g., territory, po
- War is a costly lottery:
  - each side has some probability of winning,
  - each side pays costs if war occurs.
- **Key implication:** With positive costs, there is generally a **bargain
- Therefore, "war happens because someone expects to gain" is not enough—t

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Fearon's pruning: common "rationalist" claims that don't solve the puzz
Fearon argues several popular claims are **not** real explanations unless

1) "Anarchy causes war"
- **Claim:** No world government → conflict is always possible.
- **Critique:** Possibility ≠ occurrence. Even under anarchy, if both pref
- **Fix:** Anarchy matters only insofar as it produces specific bargaining

2) "War occurs when benefits exceed costs"
- **Claim:** If expected gains outweigh expected costs, war can be rationa
- **Critique:** Even if war looks "worth it," the existence of war costs u

3) "Preventive war (power shifts)"
- **Claim:** A declining state fights now to avoid worse outcomes later as
- **Critique:** A power shift alone doesn't force war—states could bargain
- **Reframing:** Preventive war is fundamentally a **commitment problem**

The three rationalist mechanisms Fearon treats as foundational
Fearon argues most coherent rationalist explanations reduce to:
1) **Private information + incentives to misrepresent**
2) **Commitment problems**
3) **Issue indivisibility** (possible but often empirically limited)

Mechanism 1: Private information + incentives to misrepresent

Core idea

- States often have **private information** about:
  - capabilities,
  - resolve (willingness to pay costs),
  - the value they place on the issue.
- If actors can't credibly share this information, they may fail to locate

Why "miscalculation" alone is incomplete

- **Naïve story:** war comes from misunderstanding/misperception.
- **Fearon's critique:** If misunderstanding is the only problem, rational
- The real mechanism is that states often have **incentives to bluff or co

Implications Fearon emphasizes

- Bargaining breakdown can occur even when:
  - both sides are instrumentally rational,
  - and peace would be better for both ex ante,

  because strategic incentives make information hard to reveal credibly.

Illustrative intuition from cases (high-level)

- **July 1914:** signals about resolve and alliance commitments were inter
- **Russo-Japanese War:** private assessments and strategic secrecy can su

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Mechanism 2: Commitment problems (why deals may not be enforceable)

Core idea

Even if both sides **know** the bargaining range, peace may fail because s

- not exploiting future advantages,
- not reneging once the other side becomes weaker,
- or not striking first when there are strong first-move incentives.

(A) Preventive war as commitment problem

- The problem isn't just "power is shifting."
- It's that the rising power **cannot credibly commit** today not to deman
- The declining power may prefer war now over an anticipated sequence of w

(B) Preemptive war and first-strike advantages

- If striking first yields a major advantage, both may fear being attacked
- This can shrink or eliminate the set of self-enforcing bargains (especia

(C) Strategic territory and “appeasement” logic
- Some concessions change future power (e.g., strategic positions).
- Giving up key territory can increase the opponent’s later leverage so mu
- This can make limited concessions non-viable, pushing toward war even if

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Mechanism 3: Issue indivisibility (limited but possible)
Core idea
- If an issue truly cannot be divided or compensated, there may be no barg

Fearon’s skepticism
- Many seemingly indivisible issues become divisible via:
  - side payments,
  - issue linkage,
  - creative arrangements (sequencing, leases, autonomy, shared control).
- So “indivisibility” is often overstated or endogenous to other constrain

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What Fearon says the field should do differently
- Stop treating broad concepts (anarchy, power shifts, offense–defense bal
- Instead, show **how** they operate through:
  - **information problems** (private information + misrepresentation),
  - or **commitment problems** (credible inability to stick to a deal),
  or in rarer cases, **true indivisibility**.

Bottom-line takeaway
- **War is bargaining failure.**
- Most rationalist explanations that survive careful scrutiny point to:
  1) **Private information + incentives to misrepresent**, and/or
  2) **Commitment problems** under anarchy,
  with **indivisibility** as a narrower residual category.